

TOWN AND COUNTRY:
THE IMAGE OF EXILE IN MEGHADŪTA

Kālidāsa has received unreserved praise for the descriptive quality of his poetry. However, no one has as yet fully explored the nature of this splendid description. We have not been given an answer to a very pertinent critical question: What is the nature and significance of this description? It will therefore be our aim, in this article, to probe systematically into at least one significant descriptive structure and find out its semantic implications.

There are two relatively distinct functions of description, the first being decorative (*citra*) and the second being symbolic and suggestive (*dhvani*)¹. Literary works in which only the decorative function prevails, *citrakāvya*, is considered by critics to possess the lowest poetic value². But the critic has to be very careful in his dealings with the decorative description. A passage which, when taken out of its context, appears to be only a decoration, can acquire within the context the value of a symbol. Decoration too has its place in poetry when it becomes a frame, a setting to life; but description attains its highest function when it reveals the aesthetic and emotive experience, *rasa*, which underlies the poetic work. Description is then no longer exterior to the total poetic reality; it is the concretisation of the poet's deeper experience, of his expectations and desires.

Kālidāsa's descriptions, even when taken out of their context, are never just a reproduction of the outside of an object or scene. If we consider them in the greater context in which they are embedded, we discover other dimensions of meaning, — symbolic-suggestive —, than when they are taken separately. It is with this view that we propose to analyze one significant descriptive structure, viz. the duality town-coun-

1. For the notions of the two functions in modern poetics: GERARD GENETTE, *Figures II*, Seuil, Paris, 1969, pp. 58-9; in Sanskrit poetics, *Dhvanyāloka* III, 42-3.

2. MAMMAṬA, *Kāvya-prakāśa*, I.5.

try, which according to us forms an important semantic element of *Meghadūta*.

In order to grasp the symbolic meaning of a discourse we have first to find out what constitutes the symbolism: this is the analytical aspect of our study; next, we have to synthesize our findings so that the structure reveals the meaning: this is the interpretative aspect, this is what the symbolism wishes to say, this is its «expressiveness»³

The symbol, in this case, the complex descriptive texture made up of the interrelation between the town and the country, points towards a second meaning, which lies behind the first level of designation. «Il y a symbole», writes Paul Ricoeur, «lorsque le langage produit des signes de degré composé où le sens, non content de désigner quelque chose, désigne un autre sens qui ne saurait être atteint que dans et par sa visée»⁴. This idea of symbolism is not new and not limited to the modern Western thought; Ānandavardhana also speaks of other degrees of meaning. The «expressiveness» of symbolism is called *pratīyamāna*, which is different from the denotative meaning — *tasya vācyaḥ anyatvam*⁵.

Our effort will then be twofold, analysis and interpretation; it will be a constant coming and going between the denotative level and the expressive level.

We intend to show that this duality, town-country, reflects the condition of the Yakṣa's mind, his expectations and his desires; and that this mind itself is urbanized, moulded by the conception that the highest beauty comes through art; it is not the simple spontaneous unpolished face of nature.

Some writers tend to think that the ancient Indian culture was predominantly a rural culture. Goḍe⁶ says that Kālidāsa's metaphors picture a civilisation which was fostered in the forests. But this is a very partial vision, both of Kālidāsa and of the Indian culture. The urban culture is as much a part of the Indian life at the time of Kālidāsa as the beauty and grandeur of villages and forests, rivers and mountains: Kālidāsa's works abound in splendid descriptions of cities, real or imaginary, like Ujjayinī, Ayodhyā, Oṣadhiprastha, Alakā. A superficial reading of *Meghadūta* may lead one to think that Kālidāsa has a nostalgic preference for the country, but when we analyse the descriptions, we are struck by the realisation that the bright shadow of the «town» is everpresent, as the symbol of perfection, as the highest standard of comparison.

3. PAUL RICOEUR, *The Problem of the Double-Sense as Hermeneutic Problem and as Semantic Problem*, in «Myths and Symbols, Studies in Honor of Mircea Eliade», Chicago and London, 1969, pp. 78-9.

4. PAUL RICOEUR, *De l'interprétation, essai sur Freud*, Seuil, Paris, 1965, pp. 4-5.

5. *Dhvanyāloka*, I, 4 vṛtti.

6. P. K. GOḌE, *Mahākavi Kālidāsa ki upamāṃ kā manovaijñānik adhyayan*, pp. 107-19, repr. in «Kālidāsa Granthāvalī», ed. Sītārām Caturvedī, 3rd ed. Kāśī, saṃvat 2019, p. 119 (Part 3).

However, we should bear in mind that the Kālidāsian town is not the town of the modern poets, it is not infernal; it is one of those norms and archetypes, the Good City⁷, a piece of Heaven, *divaḥ khaṇḍam ekam*⁸ (30). For the poet of today the modern city as a phenomenon of experience, contrasts vehemently with the archetype of imagination⁹, but for Kālidāsa experience did not annul imagination. Therefore he could use the town and the country as poetic units and contrast them, as he wished, to bring out the intended significance.

The opposition town-country in *Meghadūta* does not lead to the absolute rejection of the one and the acceptance of the other; it is rather the projection of the one, the town, on the other, the country.

The very opening verse clearly points to the contrast and also to the reason underlying this contrast:

*kaścit kāntā-viraha-guruṇā svādhikāra-pramattah
śāpenāstaṁ-gamita-mahimā varṣa-bhogyeṇa bhartuḥ
yakṣaś cakre Janaka-tanayā-snāna-puṇyodakeṣu
snigdha-cchāyā-taruṣu vasatiṁ Rāma-giryāśrameṣu* (1)

For the neglect of his duty, a certain Yakṣa was deprived of his glorious status by the curse of his master: condemned to suffer grievous separation from his beloved for the length of a year, he made his home among the hermitages of Rāmagiri, whose trees gave gentle shade and whose waters were sanctified by the bath of Janaka's daughter.

Several words and allusions here are especially significant. The word « *kāntā-viraha* », separation from his beloved wife, creates the psychological background, — the psychology of exile —; the separation is a forced one, brought about by the curse of the Yakṣa's master, Kubera. And his wife lives in Alakā, Kubera's capital. The exiled Yakṣa's mind is constantly drawn towards home, even though he knows that this separation will last one whole year. We should note here, that the Yakṣa's home is Alakā where his beloved wife is.

The idea of exile is reinforced by the allusion to another story of exile, that of the Rāmāyaṇa. The mention of *Janaka-tanayā*, daughter of Janaka, i.e. Sītā, bathing in the lakes of the Rāma-giri, and the name of the mountain itself, bring to the reader's mind the great exile of Rāma. In this verse neither Alakā nor Ayodhyā, Rāma's city, are mentioned by name, but we can easily discover the underlying tension between the shaded hermitage, *āśrama*, which at other times would be a place of rest and solace, and the splendid cities of Alakā and Ayodhyā which loom bright in the mind of the banished Yakṣa.

7. MICHAEL HAMBURGER, *The Truth of Poetry*, Harmondsworth, 1972, p. 296.

8. Numbers after Sanskrit quotations refer to the stanzas of *Meghadūta*, ed. E. Hultzsch, London, 1911.

9. HAMBURGER, *op. cit.*, p. 301.

The nature is beautiful in itself, tender, full of repose, holy. But these very things take a different significance for the Yakṣa, because he has not come here to seek repose, he is not a hermit but a lover condemned to live far from his wife, *abalā-viprayuktaḥ sa kāmī* (2). Thus the Yakṣa's mind sees only the distance that separates him from home and he tries to bridge this distance by sending a message to his wife through the cloud, although he knows very well that this is a hopeless endeavour — for is not the cloud only a mass of vapour, fire, water and wind, *dhūma-jyotiḥ-salila-marutāṃ saṃnipātaḥ* (5), without sense or mind, *paṭu-karaṇa*?

The whole emphasis is on the distance: the word *dūra*, far, is repeated on several occasions. First, the poet says that when the rains come, even the hearts of those who are happy languish; isn't it all the more so, of those whose beloved are far away — *dūra-saṃstha* (3)? Next, the Yakṣa himself says,

vidhi-vaśād dūra-bandhur gato 'ham (6)

Fate has willed that I should be far away from my beloved.

The path which leads from Rāmagiri to Alakā is very long. Not only has Fate conspired that the Yakṣa should be far away, it has moreover barred the way to Alakā. This is what the Yakṣa says in his message to his wife:

dūravartī... vidhinā vairiṇā ruddha-mārgaḥ (98),

Far away... and the way barred by adverse fate.

Before starting to describe the path, *mārga*, which the cloud has to follow, the Yakṣa indicates by the words *khinnāḥ khinnāḥ* and *kṣiṇāḥ kṣiṇāḥ* (13) that the journey will be tiresome and long.

From the very beginning Kālidāsa lays stress on the fact of exile and the distance. At the two opposite ends of this distance stand the *āśrama*, the symbol of country, the place of exile, and Alakā, the divine city, the place of love and union.

In order to bring out this contrast we shall try to analyse the images of town and country that Kālidāsa presents before us. Home, *vasatī*, for the Yakṣa is really Alakā: we see this clearly when we put side by side the two verses where the word « *vasatī* » occurs:

1. *Yakṣaś cakre... vasatiṃ Rāmagiryāśrameṣu* (1)

The Yakṣa made his home among the hermitages of Rāmagiri.

2. *gantavyā te vasatir Alakā nāma Yakṣeśvarāṇām* (7)

You shall go to Alakā, home of the glorious Yakṣas.

In the first, the verb *cakre*, « made », lays stress on the temporary character of this dwelling; it is not really his home; in contrast, Alakā is *the* home.

Let us now analyse the pattern of the country and of the town. We shall consider only the earthly scene, because when we take the heavenly scene the contrast disappears; the hills and forests where Śiva dwells are as perfect as the divine city Alakā. It is only on the earth that we find the contrast.

There is no gainsaying that the image which Kālidāsa paints of the countryside, of nature untempered by human art, is one of intense beauty, both in poetic vision and in imaginative expression. What we want to show is that all this beauty is, to the Yakṣa's mind, an obstacle which will delay the flight of the messenger towards his home. Because of this we find a sense of haste in this context. The Yakṣa evokes the beauty of the country which cannot be denied; but he urges the cloud not to tarry too long:

*sthitvā tasmin vana-cara-vadhū-bhukta-kuñje muhurtam
toyotsarga-drutatara-gatis tat-param vartma tīrṇaḥ...* (15)

Stay there for a while in the bowers which are the pleasant resorts of the forest-dwellers' wives; then let fall your burden of water to quicken your speed and go further...

Here we should notice the stress on the word *muhurtam*, moment; the Yakṣa, further, seems to say: You will have to make up for the time lost, by going faster — *drutatara-gati*. A similar contrast occurs again between *drutam* and *kāla-kṣepam*.

*utpaśyāmi drutam api sakhe mat-priyārtham yiyāsoḥ
kāla-kṣepam kakubha-surabhau parvate-parvate te...* (22)

Though you would, friend, like to go quickly for the sake of my beloved, yet I can imagine your delay on those hills fragrant with the kakubha-blooms...

The country is beautiful but does not have the art to hold one for long; the movement is towards the town. The cloud is asked to tarry just a while to enjoy the beauty of the country, but he should then go further:

kimcit paścād vraja laghu-gatir bhūya evottareṇa (16)

After a short while, move on again lightly, towards the North.

But when the cloud comes to a town the sense of haste is less; although until the cloud reaches Alakā he cannot stop, yet every town is, so to say, an image of the home-town. The Yakṣa says, When you come to Vidiśā you will attain the perfect fruit of love, *phalam avikalam kāmukatvasya* (24). You have to go further, but only after you have rested yourself, *visrāntaḥ san vraja* (26).

The partiality to the city is also marked when we hear that in spite of all the haste, the Yakṣa instructs the cloud to abandon the straight path so that he may visit Ujjayinī:

*vakrah panthā yad api bhavataḥ prasthitasyottarāśāṃ
saudhotsaṅga-praṇaya-vimukho mā sma bhūr Ujjayinīyāḥ* (27)

Do not shun the loving company of Ujjayinī's palace-roofs though the way be indirect for you who are northward-bound.

The contrast in the use of the time-element in respect to the country and the town gives greater value to the town.

Another point of contrast is the nature of the descriptive elements. The country is beautiful but it is not the expression of the perfect beauty; whereas the town is perfect. Not only Alakā but even Ujjayinī is heavenly. The city of Ujjayinī, as it were, is a bright piece of heaven, *divaḥ kāntimat khaṇḍam ekam* (30). The description of the country shows elements which disturb the quiet enjoyment of beauty. Beauty, we should remember, resides in the enjoyment of it, in *rasāsvādāna*. That reality which possesses elements that disturb the quiet enjoyment is therefore imperfect. The forests have forest-fires (21), *vanopaplava* (17), *davāgni* (53), which torment the mountains and burn the tails of yaks: *badhetolkā-kṣapita-camarī-vāla-bhāro davāgniḥ* (53).

But in the town there are no such disturbing elements. Even the image of the cloud is different in the country; he is asked to cover the bodies of the proud *śarabha*, with the terrible laughter of a shower of hail, *tumula-karakā-vrṣṭi-hāsa* (54). But in the town, in Ujjayinī, the roar of thunder is to be the rolling sound of drums at the worship of Śiva:

*kurvan saṁdhyā-bali-pāṭahatām śūlināḥ ślāghanīyām
āmandrāṇām phalam avikalāṇi lapsyase garjitānām* (34)

By imitating the praiseworthy drum at the evening-worship of Śiva you shall get the perfect reward of your deep-rolling thunder.

In the same way, he is asked not to frighten the women of Ujjayinī at night by his rumbling thunder, or by the shower of rain; but, on the contrary, to show them the way to their lovers' home with his lightning:

*saudāmanyā kanaka-nikaṣa-snigdhayā darśayorvīm
toyotsarga-stanita mukharo mā sma bhūr viklavās tāḥ* (37)

Light up the ground with your lightning, gentle as a streak of gold on the touchstone, let not the rain fall nor the thunder roar: they are timid.

Another contrast is between the townswomen and the countrywomen. The typical countrywomen are the simple Siddha-women who tremble in fear, thinking that the cloud is a mountaintop carried off by

the wind (14); or the villagewomen, *janapada-vadhū*, whose eyes have not learned the skilful play of the eyebrows (16); or the flowergirls who must work hard to pluck the jasmine: sweat flows down their cheeks, and as they wipe their cheeks the ear-lotuses shaken violently by the hands wither away (26). These are artless women, one may enjoy their company for a while, *kiṃcit* (16), *kṣaṇa-paricita* (26), but they cannot give the delight which the artful townswomen can.

Notice the contrast between the tremulous restless eyes, *lolāpāṅga locana* (28) of the townswomen and the previously mentioned artless eyes of the villagewomen. The townswomen dress their hair and make them fragrant with the smoke of incense (32); in contrast the flower ornaments of villagewomen are disordered (26).

Above all the contrast town-country is marked by the anthropomorphic images that are so often superimposed on nature. These lend unambiguously a higher aesthetic value to the townswomen than to the unsophisticated villagewomen. The mind of the Yakṣa is filled with the image of Alakā and his home and his wife. The whole nature is the projection of this mind which is fashioned by a highly refined urbanity.

Much has been said of the anthropomorphism in the natural descriptions of Sanskrit poets; we need not dwell upon this point. What we want to emphasize is the fact that the human forms Kālidāsa superimposes are those of townsfolk; this symbolic superimposition reveals the Yakṣa's urbanity. The decorative aspect of the description recedes to the background to make room for the symbolic expression of this psycho-poetic urban world. If we understand this process of superimposition, it will not be difficult to interpret the poem as the expression of an urban mentality.

Let us take a few examples which will make clear this process of urbanisation. In this poem several rivers are personified as perfect *nāyikās*, skillful in the coquettish art of love; these *nāyikās* are not simple, *mugdhā*, like the villagewomen. Of Vetravatī it is said:

sa-bhrū-bhaṅgaṃ mukhaṃ iva payo Vetravatīś calormi (24)

... the quivering water of Vetravatī like a face with brows knitted...; of Nirvindhya:

*vici-kṣobha-stanita-vihaga-śreṇi-kāñci-guṇāyāḥ
saṃsarpantīyāḥ skhalita-subhagaṃ darśitāvarta-nābheḥ
Nirvindhyaḥ... (28)*

... of Nirvindhya whose girdle-string is made of a row of birds resounding with the waves' upsurge, and who stumbles gracefully as she meanders along revealing her whirlpool-navel...

Both these show the transmutation of the rivers into townswomen. One of the characteristics of these women is the play of sidelong glances, *lolāpāṅga* (27); on several occasions we discover this trait of urbanisation. Of the river Gambhīrā, the Yakṣa says, that the glances are bright

and flickering like the upward leaps of the restless silvery *śaphara*-fish: *caṭula-śapharodvartana-prekṣitāni* (40). This image finds its reflection later in the picture of the Yakṣa's wife who is the townswoman of the perfectly heavenly town, Alakā. The Yakṣa tells the cloud:

*tvayy āsanne nayanam upari-spandi śaṅke mṛgākṣyā
mīna-kṣobhāc cala-kuvalaya-śrī-tulām eṣyatīti* (92).

At your approach, I am afraid, the eye of that fawn-eyed girl will look up tremulously, acquiring thus a beauty like that of the water-lily shaken by a darting fish.

Compare again the description of the love-play of the Yakṣawomen whose dresses are loosened, *nīvī-bandhocchvasita-śīthilam...* *kṣaumatam* (69), with the words describing the river Gambhīrā:

*tasyāḥ kiṃcit kara-dhṛtam iva prāpta-vānīra-śākhām
hṛtvā nīlam salila-vasanam mukta-rodho-nitambam...* (41)

Drawing away her blue water-garment held lightly by the reeds as by a hand, to disclose her hip-like banks...

In this anthropomorphism we notice the strong influence of the sophisticated town-life. This superimposition is significant in the context of the Yakṣa's mental state. Here, it is not just a poetic convention; it has a real psychological function; instead of a conventional descriptive means it has become a symbolic projection of his tormented soul. After giving the message to the cloud he says that these words are composed by his yearning anguished heart, *utkaṇṭhā-viracita-pada* (99). Not only the words of the message, but the whole speech is the concrete expression of this anguish. He projects on nature the image of his longing, which is, because of his origin and background, the image of the town and the town-life.

We shall note another element of contrast. When the Yakṣa mentions Śiva, Bhavānī or Skanda in the context of the town, Ujjayinī or Alakā, we find the expression of riches, splendour, dance, music, love-play; but in the context of the country the expression is that of homely simplicity and affection. The first aspect suggests the image of artistic beauty and perfection, in contradistinction to the simple beauty of nature.

In the context of Alakā which is the highest ideal, we read of the divine couple walking hand in hand on the artificial hill, *kṛdā-saila*:

*Sambhunā datta-hastā
kṛdā-śaile yadi ca vihareṭ pāda-cāreṇa Gaurī...* (60)

And if Gaurī holding Sambhu's hand, should take a walk on the playhill...

What is brought into focus here is the aspect of urban life; the same aspect is reflected in the shrine in Ujjayinī, where temple-girls dance

and wave the yak-tail fans, their girdle-bells tinkling with the rhythmic dance-steps (35). Here we have a scene of splendour, wealth, dance and music. But away from the city, on the Devagiri Hill, the scene is very different. Around the temple of Caṇḍeśvara in Ujjayinī blow voluptuous winds from Gandhavatī, fragrant with lotus-pollen and bearing the perfumes from the bodies of young bathing girls. The holy shrine, *punyaṁ dhāma*, is:

*dhūtodyānaṁ kuvalaya-rajo-gandhibhir Gandhavatyāś
toya-kriḍābhirata-yuvati-snāna-tiktair marudbhiḥ* (33)

... whose gardens are fanned by the winds of Gandhavatī bearing the perfume of lotus-pollen and of the baths of young women playing with water.

But in Devagiri, home of Śiva's son, Skanda, a cool breeze blows; this breeze is also perfumed, not with the perfumes that the townswomen use, but with the perfume of the earth, — *vasudhā-gandha-samparka-ramyah...* *śīto vāyuh* (42). Here the thunder remains a thunder, whose sound echoes in the mountains (44); it does not have to imitate the drum; the dancers here are not the temple courtezans, but the peacocks; Bhavānī too wears the fallen feathers of the peacock's tail over her ears instead of lotuspetsals.

We find therefore a constant confrontation of the town and the country in *Meghadūta*. This confrontation leads to the attribution of a higher poetic value to the town; this does not, however, mean the denial of the country.

We must understand this preference in the psychological context of the Yakṣa's vision. Kālidāsa, the poet, the first speaker, as a court-poet, may have a preference for the town, for art in opposition to nature. But that is not at present our concern. From the poem itself it is difficult to deduce how far the poet identifies himself with the second speaker, the poet's creation, the Yakṣa. Except the five opening stanzas the whole poem is a narration by the Yakṣa. And when we consider it in that context, we notice that the descriptions which are on the decorative level images of the country, become on the symbolic-expressive level the projection of the Yakṣa's mind. The mental world of the Yakṣa is made of the anguish of exile; his efforts to reach his wife are useless; a great distance and a year (a part of which has already passed) separate him from his wife. He would that time and space were reduced, but impossible are these desires. Exile is the only reality:

*itthaṁ cetaś caṭula-nayane durlabha-prārthanāṁ me
gāḍhoṣmābhiḥ kṛtam aśaraṇaṁ tvad-viyoga-vyāthābhiḥ* (105)

In this way my heart, of which it is difficult to fulfil the desire, is made helpless, o tremulous-eyed girl; by the deeply burning anguish of separation from you.

The symbolic nature of the description arises from the Yakṣa's desire to reunite with his wife and from the terrible sense of exile. The whole nature is pervaded by this mental stuff. The true place, the perfect heaven is Alakā, his home where his wife is. And in his fancy the Yakṣa tries to recreate that home. What is nearest to him in space, is the country, so different from the palaces of Alakā; it is beautiful with a simple beauty, not chastened by art. His fancy gives artistic perfection to it by superimposing the images of the town and town-life. It is only in an earthly town, in particular in Ujjayinī, not in the country-scenes, that he finds a near-perfect expression of his dream.

The description reflects on the one hand the past experience of the Yakṣa, the memories of Alakā and of the love-play with his wife; and on the other hand the image of the future re-union, a dream-fulfilment. Bhāmaha, defining *bhāvikatva*, says

*bhāvikatvam iti prāhuḥ prabandha-viśayaṃ guṇam
pratyakṣā iva dṛśyante yatrārthā bhūta-bhāvināḥ* (3.53)

Bhāvikatva, « expressiveness », it is said, is an artistic quality on the level of composition. In this case, objects past and future are seen concretely.

In the description of *Meghadūta* it is this *bhāvikatva* that we find at work. It makes concrete and expressive, through the contrast town-country, the mental state of the exiled Yakṣa which lies deeper than the decorative level of description.